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# OFF NEWBURYPORT BAR

BY HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD

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Out of the chambers of the sea the gale  
Blows through the ancient town. And all its breath  
Is bitter with the salt spume that has knit  
Fans of white fire above the straining tops  
Of masts that quiver to their fall. All night  
Hollows of the horizon heave vast sighs;  
We hear great organ-music through our dreams,  
Or wake to tremble at the helpless cry  
Of surges roaring into nothingness.

But in the narrow ways of streets and courts  
And under battling boughs, though wild sound smite  
Pulses to stillness, yet is the sight forfend  
Of all the plain of the dim deep whose wreaths  
That soar and sink are powdered into air  
Blown thinner than a ghost. Nor ours to see  
Torment of watery tumultuousness,  
Nor any seething of the shoaling seas  
In heartbreak of dull twilight; nor when clear  
The moon along the edge of the clouds runs out  
To touch the leaping spray, and hurrying hides  
In caverns of the night and storm, while gulfs  
Of black and silver burst in monstrous shapes  
Hovering and swooping; nor when springing day  
A swift and sudden arrow shoots and wakes  
The cock of sacrifice upon his spire  
To splendid life.

He, on his spindle set,  
Nor veering in the teeth of the blast that sings  
In mighty rhythms from the outer east,  
Looks with defiant eye across the bar  
That, vague with changing phantoms of the foam,  
Rears all its flashing crest from march to march  
Of the low sand-dunes.

He, and he alone,  
Sees lines of parting coast, and one long league  
Combed white as wool where the broad breaker tears  
The tide incoming to suck down the shore  
With every plunge of its mad shock that plays  
With continents for counters. Wide and wild—  
Again the gracious gold of morning lost—  
He sees in gloom the gray expanses meet

Gray heaven, if that be heaven which bends so low  
It mantles jets and shafts and flying falls  
Of spinning scud and the chance wave that looms  
Like some wan giant vanishing in cloud  
Upon the swell.

He, when in one great sheet  
The rending mists let out a sudden sea  
With bout of blast and billow, on his watch  
That compasses meridians of storm,  
Sees at broad anchorage the fishing-craft,  
Stripped to the challenge of the tempest; sees  
Far off the fated barque whose broken mast  
Rakes the last verge, and up whose slant deck ride  
The hungry hordes that ravage her, the while  
She drifts through weltering furrows to the land  
That lies in treacherous wait beneath its mask  
Of shallows that in the sunshine of yestere'en  
Played green and azure beauty over sands  
Tarnished and tawny.

Still within the east  
That, sullen, gathers back its bitter breath,  
He sees gaunt wings that shine in flame and snow,  
Skim in wide circles, sweep and dip to snatch  
The long tress streaming weed-like through the wave  
That glasses dead illusion, sliding on  
From slope to slope and ever shoreward tossed  
Where the fierce ledges wade to meet their prey.  
And with the passing of the day he sees  
The Ipswich and White Island lenses fire  
With racing sparkles all the red-lipped pack  
Rolling and ravening beneath. He sees  
Across the waste of tumbling waters then  
Spent sailors clinging to the shrouds that ring  
To dreadful music, multitudinous song,  
Far born and swollen full of death and doom,  
Voice breaking into voice above their graves,  
Their shifting graves—while all the lights of home  
Begin to tremble through the evening air,

The purple evening that the great gale leaves  
Still shaken with long soughs and sobs.

But we,  
Shut in among our streets and narrow ways  
From all the gusty tumult of the seas  
And yeasty evanescence, only know  
The room that like a rose with firelight blooms,  
And the worn woman screening with her hand  
The pane through which she peers, then shuddering turns  
To mark the little children at the hearth  
Watch with strange thrills, half terror and half sport,  
Her mounting shadow climb and follow her  
And crouch and sink upon her like a pall  
As the ash gathers and the brand burns black.

HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD.